

A Brief Introduction to Feminist Theories

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Abstract: Feminist movements were born among new bourgeoisie women, and were closely related to French Industrial Revolution and American Abolition Movement. From the mid-19th century to the present, feminism has experienced three waves. However, regardless of theoretical faction, feminists and feminist critics all recognize the historical fact that women are suppressed and discriminated against by men. Based on ‘patriarchy’ and ‘gender’, they discuss sexual issues to rewrite the history of literature and literary criticism, and rediscover female writers and works buried under the male society and patriarchal culture to construct ‘female discourse’ to support ‘female writing’.

Keywords: feminist theories; feminist criticism; patriarchy; gender

Introduction

The term feminism, first appeared in France in 1870, was used to describe male adolescents who developed lung disease and exhibited female characteristics. But it soon became a synonym of women’s liberation, referred to women’s claims for their equal social rights with men. In 1880s, feminism first appeared in England. American began to use it in 1920s, but only professional women who served in government or taught in universities would use the term. In 1980s, feminism began to pay more attention to the equality of culture and spirit between men and women, try to break down sexual hegemony ---- ‘patriarchy’ and explore deeply into the causes of ‘gender’ inequality. Feminist criticism is the product of extensive feminist movements, criticizes ‘gender’ discrimination from the point of literature. Based on the core concept of feminist theories, ‘patriarchy’ and ‘gender’, feminist critics criticize patriarchal culture and classics from different point of view. “From the mid-19th century to the present, feminism has experienced three waves, which seemed to confirm Fisher’s assertion ---- modern women, like glaciers, are slowly cutting out a new economic and social landscape to build a new world.”^[1]

The Core Concept of Feminist Theories

The emergence of feminist criticism is the result of extensive development of feminist movements. It is the product of feminist movements that penetrate deeply into cultural field. Western feminist theoretical trend was diversified at the beginning, so feminist criticism has always been characterized by diversity. However, regardless of theoretical faction, feminists and feminist critics all recognize the historical fact that women are suppressed and discriminated against by men. They acknowledge that all knowledge created by patriarchal society is served to suppress women and ‘gender’ is the root of women’s oppression.

‘Patriarchy’

‘Patriarchy’ is a proper noun in early anthropology, refers to clan organization and cultural structure centered on ‘patriarchy’ in human society. It symbolizes male domination which maintains that all authoritative positions in politics, economics, law, religion, education, military must be reserved for men. As an invisible hand, ‘patriarchy’ makes men dominant in society while women disadvantage and subordinate. Under the background of patriarchal society, the paradigm, obviously as a result of elaborate rather than natural fabrication, which indicates that men are superior than women influences everyone from patriarchal family. Feminist theories extends ‘patriarchy’ to the whole history from patriarchal clan commune to today’s society to reveals that ‘patriarchy’ is the social precondition of women’s oppression.

‘Gender’

‘Gender’ is the core concept of western feminist theories in the second wave. The proposition of ‘gender’ has a profound influence on western feminist theories. Almost every feminist critics have responded to ‘gender’ and made their own evaluation on it. The first to propose ‘gender’ is Simone de Beauvoir, who explicitly rejects the conventional perspective that sex and ‘gender’ are an organic unity. “Sex is caused by biological factor ---- chromosome in human body while ‘Gender’ is constructed by mentality, culture and social means.”^[2] The social shaping process of human ‘gender’ role, which starts from infancy in a subtle way, is quite different from other education and socialization

processes of human beings. Parents will buy cap gun for boys, but dolls for girls, and choose to control the behavior of boys and girls consciously and unconsciously. For example, boys will be scolded when they are crying while girls will be comforted. The social shaping process of human 'gender' role will cause the formation of 'masculinity' and 'femininity', which are explained by 'patriarchy' as natural things and become an excuse for men to deprive women's rights.

Feminist Criticism

Feminist criticism is the product of feminist movements and is a kind of literary criticism focused on women themselves and their writing. "It has two starting points, one is to reexamine the whole literature history from the perspective of women, the second is to establish a independent kingdom of women's literature or a literature that fully displays female world."^[3]

First-wave Feminist Criticism

First-wave feminist criticism developed extensively throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Women's Rights and Women's Suffrage movements were the crucial determinants in shaping this phase, with their emphasis on social, political and economic reform. Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir are the representatives of this phase.

"Virginia Woolf is the founding mother of contemporary feminism, who announces many issues later feminist critics were to focus on and who herself becomes the terrain over which some debates have struggled."^[4] As a pioneer of feminism, Woolf's contribution to feminist criticism is well known. Her famous work *A Room of One's Own* focuses on the history and social context of women's literary production. "She thinks that what makes women's writing differ from men's writing is not women's mentality but their social status."^[5] She believes that when women get the same social status with men they also can create great works. So she puts forward that a room of one's own which is both material and spiritual and 500 pounds a year are the basic conditions for women to create. She realizes that women's identity is constructed by social means, rejects a 'feminist' consciousness and wants her femininity to be unconscious so that she might escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness. "She appropriates the Bloomsbury sexual ethic of 'androgyny' and hopes to achieve a balance between a 'male' self-realization and 'female' self-realization."^[6]

Simone de Beauvoir marks the moment when 'first-wave' feminism begins to slip into the 'second-wave'. She thinks that 'gender' identity is not innate but constructed by society and culture. "Making the crucial distinction between 'being female' and being constructed as 'a woman', de Beauvoir can posit the destruction of patriarchy if women will only break out of their objectification."^[7] Her representative work *The Second Sex* is considered as the most robust and sensible book to discuss women, an incisive summary for contemporary feminist movements and theories and the Bible for western feminist movements. In *The Second Sex*, she uses a novel and unique perspective to analyze the history of women and finds that women are shaped by social culture and patriarchy as 'the second sex' weaker than men. "Men limit women to families, making them less capable than men and giving them unique 'femininity'.^[8] "This 'femininity' is constructed under the influence and oppression of 'patriarchy' which is rooted in the 'binary opposition system' between men and women."^[9] "The *Second Sex* is clearly pre-occupied with the 'materialism' of the first wave, it beckons to the second wave in its recognition of the vast difference between the interests of the two sexes and in its assault on men's biological and psychological, as well as economic, discrimination against women."^[10]

Second-wave Feminist Criticism

The first-wave feminist criticism ended with the victorious passage of bills such as women's property rights and voting rights, but women still didn't acquire true independence and freedom. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 revealed 'feminine mysticism' with patriarchal social ideology which stipulated and propagated 'femininity' to bring women back home again. From men's perspective, families are the best place for women to realize their value, education and works are the obstacles for women to realize their value and 'femininity'. The publication of *The Feminine Mystique* resonated with women and marked the beginning of the second-wave feminist criticism.

The first important feminist critic is Kate Millett in the second phase. Her argument in her representative work *Sexual Politics* is that ideological introduction as much as economic inequality is the cause of women's oppression, which opened up second-wave thinking about reproduction sexuality and representation. *Sexual Politics*, as a formative text in feminist criticism, is a pioneering analysis of masculinist historical, social and literary images of women, and proves that how literature and political philosophy carefully conspire against sexual equality. "She stresses the importance of rereading text and rediscovering 'gender' identity to represent female image, which breaks down the

authoritative and credible female image drawn by traditional male writers in literature.”^[11]

Elaine Showalter is another important American feminist critic in the second-wave feminist criticism, who is the pioneer of theory ‘gynocritics’, and one of the most influential American critics of contemporary western feminist criticism. Her representative work *A Literature of Their Own* examines British female novelists since Bronte to Lessing through women’s experience. She criticizes the sexual discrimination actions in which patriarchal culture marginalizes female literature, and condemns the double critique standards upon female literature. Her attention is not only focused on great female novelists but also those who are ignored. She tries to understand how women begin to write in the face of repression and find out the reasons why female literary traditions can survive and continue. She divides this tradition into three phases. “The first, ‘feminine’ phase (1840-80) includes Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot, and is one where women writers imitated and internalized the dominant male aesthetic standards which required that female authors remain gentlewomen; the ‘feminist’ phase (1880-1920) includes such radical feminist writers as Elizabeth Robins and Olive Schreiner, who protest against male values and advocate separation utopias and suffragette sisterhoods; the third, ‘female’ phase (1920 onwards) inherited characteristics of the former periods and developed the idea of specifically female writing and female experience in a phase of self-discovery.”^[12]

In addition to American feminist critics, French feminist critics also played crucial roles in the second-wave feminist criticism, especially in theoretical contribution. After 1970s, French feminist critics began to pay more attention to the thinking of philosophy and literary text to relate the history and current situation of women to contemporary philosophy. French feminism has been deeply influenced by psychoanalysis, especially by Lacan’s reworking of Freud. “On the basis of the recognition of ‘gender’ difference, French feminists called on women to devote themselves into social practice and strive for real equality.”^[13]

Helen Cixous proposes to use bodies to express female’s existence, needs and desires, and show their own characteristics in new ways through physical differences. Her essay *The Laugh of Medusa* is a celebrated manifesto of ‘women’s writing’ which calls for women to put their ‘bodies’ into their writing to deconstruct patriarchal culture and subvert ‘phallogocentrism’. Cixous had been working to reject ‘masculine/feminine binary opposition’ to establish women as the source of life and call for emergence of new female discourse which was oppressed by patriarchal binary system.

Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum de l’autre femme* develops, in more rigorously philosophical terms, ideas which resemble Cixous’s. “She considers that patriarchal oppression of women is founded on the type of negative constructions associated with Freud’s theory of female sexuality.”^[14] She realizes the difference between men and women, argues that male exploitation of female is based on sexual difference. In traditional identification of gender difference, male are the subject in the works and world so that male become the subject of ethics, morality or politics. However female are object so that they can only engage in secondary art, such as cooking, weaving, embroidery, music, etc. The formation of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ is the result of ‘phallic domination’. Only the celebration of women’s difference ---- their fluidity and multiplicity ---- can rupture conventional Western representations of them.

Under the influence of Lacan’s psychoanalysis, Julia Kristeva absorbs semiotics of Saussure, and puts forward the difference between ‘semiotics’ and ‘symbolic’. ‘Semiotic’ represents maternal idiosyncrasy while ‘symbolic’ represents masculine idiosyncrasy. “For this ‘semiotic’ material to become ‘symbolic’ it must be stabilized, and this involves repression of the flowing and rhythmic drives.”^[15] ‘Semiotic’ is the predecessor of ‘symbolic’ and lies in ‘symbolic’ to protect and subvert it. Kristeva advocates that women can’t tacitly approve their unequal status in patriarchal society, because women are unique and have their own idiosyncrasy. If women do not struggle for their own idiosyncrasy, they will give up their own existence.

Beside American and French feminist critics, English feminist critics also struggled a lot for women’s rights. Socialist/Marxist feminism was a powerful stand of the second-wave during the late 1960s and 1970s, in British in particular. “It sought to extend Marxism’s analysis of class into a women’s history of their material and economic oppression, and especially of how the family and women’s domestic labour are constructed by and reproduce the sexual division of labour.”^[16] Michele Barrett is one of representatives of Socialist/Marxist feminism. She applauds Virginia Woolf’s materialist argument, and puts forward that the ideology of gender affects the way the writings of men and women are read and how canons are established. She also insists that feminist critics must take account of the fictional nature of literary texts.

Third-wave/Third-World Feminist Criticism

In 1980s, some minority scholars and critics from the third world challenged Western theories including Eurocentrism and Western Feminism. Their critical discourse was later called post-colonial discourse because Third-wave/Third-World Feminist Criticism is intertwined with contemporary 'post-modern' theories. It stresses female internal difference, advocates focusing on women's status in the cross of gender, race, class and sexual orientation and deconstructing curing gender identity.

Barbar Smith is one of black feminist critics insists that black feminist criticism system should be established for contending against white middle-class feminist criticism in her work *Towards a Black Feminist Criticism*. Because both literary criticism dominated by men and middle-class women ignore black women writers. Another black feminist critic, Bell Hooks also see the 'double invisibility' suffered by black women in *Ain't I A Woman*: 'No other group in American has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women... When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked the focus tends to be on white women'. [17]

Third-wave/Third-World Feminist Criticism explores the 'doubleness' or 'hybridity' of 'African-American' identity, and tries to recover the history of black's oppression and find their own artistic discourse. It focuses itself on 'Identity Criticism' to push the ignored and suppressed women from the edge to the center.

Conclusion

Women's oppression originates from a rib taken from Adam by God. Eve is made by Adam's rib reflects that 'pallogocentrism' is deeply rooted in people's minds. Men are considered normative in all myths, but women are the variation and aberration of this norm. "What men do to women is to 'take back', while women are passively to 'return'." [18] However these two opposite actions prove that men and women are a whole life integration when man and women are fused together. The emergence of feminist criticism has provided women with a stage to establish their female identity and show their literature and discourse. For the first time, feminist criticism has promoted women as the subject of criticism and revealed the dehumanizing situation of women in the male-centered culture. It not only brings new vigor and vitality to western literary criticism but also introduce 'gender', sex, bodies and such shadowed areas into the category of literary criticism. The most important is that it breaks down the old mode of literary criticism and gives a vast thinking space for struggling western contemporary ideological trend and literary criticism. Feminism and feminist criticism have become one of dominating discourse in philosophy, ethos and literary criticism in the 21st century.

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